First Opinions Second Reactions
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First Opinion: Making Space for the Tonal Subtleties of Sadness

Rosen, Michael. *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*. Illustrated by Quentin Blake, Candlewick Press, 2004.

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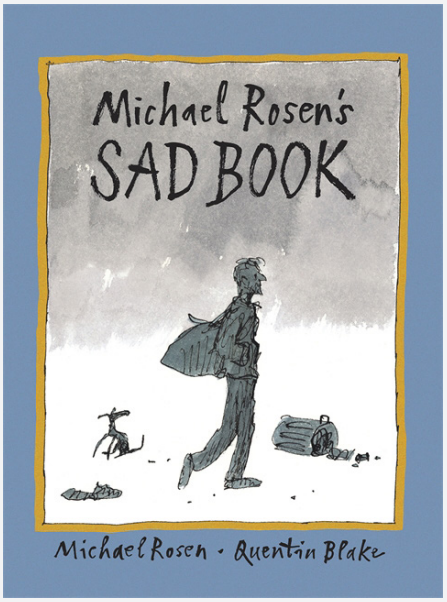

Michael Rosen's Sad Book offers a defiant answer to Matt de la Peña's recent query, "Is the job of the writer for the very young to tell the truth or preserve innocence?" (qtd. in *Time* 9 Jan, 2018). Michael Rosen and illustrator Quentin Blake have partnered up to create a complex picture book that invites readers of all ages into the *experience* of sadness rather than offering a clean, linear narrative *about* sadness. Weaving together words and images, this author-illustrator team relies on carefully crafted juxtapositions to produce meaning and affect in readers. The cover itself hints at the overarching connections of bluntness and subtly across the book. There is the title itself, *Sad Book*, which makes clear to even the youngest reader that this book is about sadness rather than more poetic versions of sadness like grief, sorrow, misery, or despair. Contrast the frankness of the title with Blake's subtle, gray tonal cover illustration of a man, roughly sketched with black ink, carrying a large bag as he walks alone under a gray sky. Working in concert, the cover image and the text establish a feeling that is achingly familiar, thus eliciting readers' own experiences with sadness, those of wandering and wayfinding in a world of gray.

In another critical juxtaposition, the book opens with images of what Rosen looks like when he's "being sad" but "pretending to happy" in a colorful, smiling portrait, and what Rosen looks like when sad is "everywhere" and "all over," reflecting a gray tonal, expressionless portrait. It is a

reminder of the ways that we try to hide sadness from each other and from ourselves, though Rosen is very explicit in not hiding his own sadness from readers. This is not a metaphorical story based on backgrounded personal experiences—it is a confessional. Rosen confronts readers early on with the very raw roots of his own sadness: the death of his young son. "He died. I loved him very, very much but he died anyway" (unpaged). The subsequent double-page spread offers eight panel illustrations, colorfully and chronologically depicting some of Rosen's beloved memories of his son growing up. The final, empty panel powerfully conveys the literal loss as well as the metaphorical emptiness of experiencing the death of a loved one.

Overall, Rosen's book is framed around three questions: Where is sad? When is sad? Who is sad? We view these questions as particularly generative and intentionally broad for prompting discussion with children before, during, and after reading. These are questions that even the youngest children can respond to, based on their lived experiences, for as Rosen ultimately writes, "Sad is anywhere. . . . Sad is any time. . . . Sad is anyone" (unpaged). Though the idea that "sad" is anywhere, anytime, and anyone may at first appear nebulous, we found the idea quite thought-provoking and even comforting. Rather than seeing sad as something rooted within our individual bodies or minds—something to be dealt with in a particular time period, in a particular place, in a particular way—Rosen juxtaposes sad as something inherently universal while also extraordinarily personal. He honestly shares bits and pieces of his own experiences with sadness, demonstrating an intentional tentativeness in making sweeping, generalized claims about how sadness is experienced. Importantly, the word "sometimes" is repeated throughout the text, as Rosen calls attention to the range of ways sadness is experienced, ignored, processed, contested, accepted, and denied: "Sometimes I want to talk about all this to someone. . . . Sometimes I don't want to talk about it. Not to anyone. No one" (unpaged).

Finally, Rosen's honest insight that "sometimes because I'm sad I do bad things . . . [but] being sad isn't the same as being horrible. I'm sad, not bad" (unpaged) feels especially powerful for children of all ages, along with teachers, administrators, and parents, to consider and discuss. A child's sadness often manifests as a constellation of behaviors (e.g., anger, annoyance, distraction, boredom, disgust, aggressiveness) before adults are able to see, really see, the deep sadness they have already internalized the need to hide. The juxtaposition of and distinction between *bad* and *sad* creates a space for children to share experiences with trauma related to poverty, domestic violence, food insecurity, abuse, neglect, divorce, death, and so forth, while beginning to understand the differences between feelings and co-occurring behaviors. Overwhelmingly, children lack the space and tools to be sad in schools, especially in an educational climate fueled by positivity, perseverance ("grit"), and optimism. But if, as Rosen suggests, sad is anywhere, anytime, and anyone, it means that children don't hang up their sadness alongside their backpacks each morning. It is the honest, brutal accounts of sadness, like *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, that help our classrooms and homes become spaces where the universality of sadness is acknowledged while the personal—in all its diversity—is heard, believed, and considered as something more than a distraction.

Work Cited

de la Peña, Matt. "Why We Shouldn't Shield Children from Darkness." *Time*. Time Inc., 9 Jan. 2018, www.time.com/5093669/why-we-shouldnt-shield-children-from-darkness. Accessed 11 Jan. 2018.

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